

So Cuddly, But Still Omnipotent
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Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
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2nd Sunday of Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11

40Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

New Testament Lesson: Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 'Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight,'"

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."



The first Bible I ever owned was a little children's New Testament and on the cover was a picture of Jesus, standing on a hillside, next to a sheep. And one of the first songs I learned as a child was "Jesus

Loves Me.” From the very beginning, my ideas of Jesus were being formed around the notion of Jesus the good shepherd: a loving, caring, figure just like my parents, only with magical powers.

As a teenager, my experience of Jesus was colored by fear and self-doubt. Each day was a new struggle in trying to discover who I would be while trying to please my parents, my peers, my coaches and any girl who would give me the time of day... which wasn't very many. I found a quote, the author of which has been lost to both my memory and to Google. When I was 16 I wrote it down and taped it to my wall: “The sheep in the shepherd's arms looks only to the shepherd, and not to the wolves around it seeking to do it harm.” During those years, that at the time seemed so difficult and fraught with peril, I saw Jesus as my protector.... with magical powers.

As a young adult, questioning where my life would take me, I began to see Jesus as a guide who was beginning to make demands on my life. I had always thought my career field would be in foreign affairs. I majored in Government and International Studies and would tell my friends that when they had children old enough to be learning about the US Ambassador to the United Nations, it would be me. But as time passed I realized that such lofty ambitions would never make me happy. My path to ministry as a vocation was a wrestling match, reminiscent of Jacob grappling with God's messenger by the river Jabbok. I saw Jesus at times, as a guide and advocate, but at other times as a relentless opponent with ideas of his own... and magical powers.

How we see and experience Jesus is often influenced by where we are along life's journey.

In his book American Jesus, Stephen Prothero argues that perhaps the greatest contribution of American Culture to Christianity is the development of a variety of images of Jesus: from Sweet Savior, to Manly Redeemer, to Superstar, Jesus has become different things to different kinds of people.

Driving back from the beach one year, I noticed that a local congregation had purchased a billboard in Garden City, and while I can't remember the words written there, I do remember the image. It was a picture of a very burly, muscle-bound Jesus breaking free from the cross. Not breaking free by pulling out the nails, but by literally breaking the cross into pieces so that they were still attached to his hands!

For these people, Jesus was not the meek and humble Lamb of God, he was a super-hero of the highest order. Evil-doers beware!

Contrast that with a woman I know who wears a small locket around her neck. Written on it are the words to that same song I learned as a child: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” In her experience which included an abusive husband who ultimately abandoned her with an 18 month-old daughter and a family from whom she spent the better part of her life estranged, it is important for her to see Jesus as someone who walks beside her and who will always love her no matter what.

But my favorite example is from the movie Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby. Some of you already know the scene I'm talking about.

Will Ferrell plays Ricky Bobby, a Champion NASCAR driver at the height of his success. In this particular scene, we see Ricky sitting down to dinner with his family and he begins to say grace. “Dear Lord baby Jesus” he prays, “We thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Dominos, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell. I just want to take time to say thank you for my family; my two beautiful, beautiful handsome striking sons Walker and Texas Ranger or ‘TR’ as we call him. And of course my red hot

smoking wife Carly, who is a stone cold fox... Dear Lord Baby Jesus we also thank you for my wife's father Chip, we hope that you can use your baby Jesus powers to heal his horrible leg... Dear 8 pound, 6 ounce, newborn infant Jesus, don't even know word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly but still omnipotent...

It is at this point in the prayer that Ricky's wife Carly interjects: "Hey, um, you know sweetie," she says. "Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby."

To which Ricky replies: "Look, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you say grace you can say it to grown up Jesus or teenaged Jesus or bearded Jesus or whoever you want."

How we see Jesus influences how we experience Advent and Christmas and traditionally, our images of advent and Christmas come from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew begins his story with the birth of Jesus while Luke begins with the birth of John the Baptist followed by the birth of Jesus.

What results is an observation of Advent and Christmas that centers on the newborn baby Jesus that Ricky Bobby liked so well. And what's not to like? Newborn Baby Jesus Christmas inspires us to celebrate birth and life. Newborn Baby Jesus Christmas is sentimental. It's about Joseph and the virgin Mary giving birth in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. It's about unity and peace on earth and the fellowship of mankind. It's about humble beginnings and infinite, divine God shedding the trappings of divinity to interject himself into the world in the life of a small, innocent child. Newborn Baby Jesus Christmas is about God's coming to us for the purpose of making a sacrifice for us.

And there is certainly nothing wrong with that.

But Mark does not tell us about the newborn baby Jesus. Mark, considered by most scholars to be the first of the gospels written, begins with John the Baptist and Jesus already as adults. This is the story of Adult Jesus Advent and if Newborn Baby Jesus Christmas is about God's sacrifice for us, then Adult Jesus Advent is about our sacrifice for God.

There is no warm and fuzzy story here. There is just John, a prophet like the prophets of old, calling the people to repent; to turn away from that which is counter to the Kingdom and to embrace the Messiah who has come to herald the arrival of the Kingdom of God. You see, often during Advent, we rush straight to Christmas and the celebration of the birth of our savior. And while we take comfort in Christ's role as savior and acknowledge at his birth the significance of his death and resurrection, we often skip over the important, challenging stuff in between.

But Mark does not. And Mark embraces the challenges of the gospel right from the beginning.

Mark begins his story not with new life, but with a look back to old traditions.

Mark quotes from the prophet Isaiah saying "the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" The passage from which this verse comes is Isaiah 40 and in it the prophet speaks a word of comfort to the people who have lived many years in exile. The exile was a dark period in Israel's history. Barbarians had swept through the land promised by God to be the home of Abraham's descendants for eternity and pillaged its cities, desecrated its temple, and carried many of its people into slavery in a foreign land; a place as it was believed, that was beyond the

geographic boundaries within which God had jurisdiction. The exile represented not just defeat, but an entire nation being cut off from their God.

It is into this tragic situation that Isaiah brings a word of grace and a word of hope. “God has forgiven you. God has set you free from your prison. Make a pathway in the wilderness, God has come to take you home.”

But the opening line “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” is actually from the book of the prophet Malachi.¹ And far from being a comforting voice, Malachi speaks of a messenger who is coming to pronounce judgment on an unrighteous Israel, and Malachi urges the people to repent.

By combining these passages together, Mark begins the gospel message with words that hearken back to the great prophetic traditions of the Old Testament. People hearing and reading these words would have been reminded of Isaiah’s comforting words of reconciliation and of Malachi’s challenging call for repentance.

Further cementing the idea, Mark describes John as wearing camel’s hair and a leather belt, which sounds very much like another great prophet of old. In 2nd Kings, Elijah is described as “a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.”²

By quoting from the prophets and depicting John as an Elijah lookalike, Mark places the story of Jesus firmly within “the sweep of salvation history.”³ What God has always promised is coming to fruition in Jesus, the Messiah.

And the people come. They come to John in the wilderness to hear what he has to say, and what he has to say is “prepare yourself for the one who is to come.” Preparation for John meant confession and repentance and ritual washing to symbolize cleansing of all that would render the faithful person unclean.

It is important to note that repentance means more than simple confession of sin. To repent is quite literally to turn away from something. And while we are promised that our sins are forgiven us, when we repent, we not only confess the things we do that are counter to the Kingdom of God, but we *then commit ourselves to changing our lives so that we stop doing them.*

Ultimately, this is what it means to prepare ourselves. This is Adult Jesus Advent.

Martin Copenhaver, a Massachusetts pastor writes:

“By starting with an adult John awaiting an adult Jesus, Mark reminds us that Jesus grew up. It is an important reminder for such a time, when it is a temptation to linger too long at the manger. A baby can be demanding, but in the case of this baby, the adult he will become is infinitely more so.”⁴

¹ Malachi 3:1

² 2 Kings 1:8

³ Copenhaver, Martin B. “Mark 1:1-8 Homiletical Perspective”, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1, ed. Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, Louisville, KY: Westminster-John Knox Press, pg. 45

⁴ Copenhaver, pg. 49

While the infant Jesus coos up at us from the manger, inspiring in us feelings of love and peace and reminding us of God's sacrifice for us. Adult Jesus demands of us that we conform ourselves to God's will and repent of that which does not conform.

But I don't think we want to hear that right now. We would rather talk about the joy of this season that, according to most of the stores I've visited lately, apparently started just after Halloween. We would rather put our energy towards the list making and the gift buying. There are, after all, an awful lot of people for whom we are going to have to buy ACC Championship gear. We would rather talk about the parties and the holiday travels to see our families. We would rather make plans to watch Christmas Vacation, and A Christmas Story (both fine films, don't get me wrong) and get our Christmas baking done and find that one perfect gift...

And in the quest for all of that... we will drive and wait in traffic and spend and stand in lines and battle crowds and spend some more, and rack up debt, and get stressed out, and wear our fingers down to nubs clicking and scrolling as we shop online... and when the holiday is finished, the bills will come due...

Advent Conspiracy is a group of pastors who have started thinking differently about Advent and Christmas. They have a website at [Advent Conspiracy.org](http://AdventConspiracy.org). You should check it out.

They point out that in the United States, estimates are that we will spend 450 Billion dollars on Christmas this year. That's billion with a "B." They also point out that lack of clean water is the cause of more preventable deaths around the world than almost anything. The cost to provide clean drinking water to those who lack it? 20 Billion dollars. That's roughly 4.4% of what we will spend on Christmas gifts, decorations, fruit cakes, and those little reindeer antlers that you put on your car.

What if, instead of focusing on the *gift* of Christ, we focused on the *demands* of Christ? What if we stopped spending on another book for dad, another sweater for Aunt Louise, another toy for junior and instead put our energies toward making a difference in a world that desperately needs us to care.

To reject consumerism; to push back against the notion that having more and spending more will make us happier: That would be true repentance. That would be a turning away from that which runs counter to the Kingdom of God.

What if instead of shopping and spending and trying to clean off our to-do lists, we stopped and spent more time with the people we love? What if we stopped trying to find the perfect gift in a store and realized that the perfect gift is our time spent reading a book or playing a game with a child; time spent sharing stories with a friend, enjoying a cup of coffee with relatives, making a phone call home to parents you rarely see? What if we stopped spending so much on things that we don't really need, and shared our love and time with one another?

In a world that values stuff and having more and better of it, that would be true repentance.

And what if we took all that money that we didn't spend on iPads and ACC Champion Golf Shirts and put it towards something like the "Feed the 5000" boxes you will pass on your way out of worship this morning?

Or what if instead of spending more on each other, we gave that money to the “Gifts that Give” program? What if we gave some of that Christmas gift money to the Heifer Project which provides livestock and training to help families in developing nations improve their nutrition and generate income in sustainable ways?⁵ What if we gave some of it to Water Missions International which works to improve lives by providing water purification systems in communities that lack clean drinking water? Both are agencies supported by the “Gifts that Give” program as are many others.

What if we shared what we have with the poor, the hurting, the lonely, the sick, the thirsty, the grieving, the imprisoned, the oppressed? That would mean a turning away from what our culture has traditionally valued. That would be true repentance.

We see Jesus as we want to see him: as comforter, as friend, as sacrifice, as champion, as burly super hero battling evil, as radical prophet calling us to be the people that God created us to be.

But regardless of how we interpret the life and meaning of Christ, we cannot ignore the demands that he places upon us. It’s okay to worship at the manger, but we can’t forget that Jesus grew up.

In this season of Advent, as we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord, let us do so in a spirit of repentance, relying on God for strength and wisdom and courage to turn away from what the world says we should be and embrace God’s will for each one of us.

Let us prepare the way of the Lord!

To God be all honor, glory, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.heifer.org/ourwork/our-work>